Things Are Rarely Easy

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Things Are Rarely Easy

by Azure_K_Mello

Summary

Life at the BAU can be truly terrible but every step Will takes back toward his life makes it a little bit more bearable. Hannibal, and dogs and breathing exercises make it easier.

The noise was unpleasant in the quiet of the morning. He could hear the first birds of the day outside and it would have been nice to wake up to that sound but so much closer there was a horrible mechanical noise. He was warm and comfy and somewhere in the back of his mind he felt happy. The noise stopped and he heard soft vowels and round consonants. Will paid no attention to the words, just listened to the rise and fall of the voice. Hannibal gently replaced his arm around Will's body and said, "Good news or bad?"

"Good," said Will.

"You slept all night without a nightmare and it's only ten minutes before your alarm would have gone off anyway." He pressed a kiss into Will's shoulder and said, "You don't snore, the dogs didn't whine at the door, your mattress is very comfortable and you feel perfect against me. And it's Friday so tonight you will officially on vacation."

Will smiled, he looked at his clock and saw that it was, indeed six-fifty, but he knew there was more, "Bad."

"Jack wants you at a crime scene and knows I'm in your bed." Will groaned and started to move away but Hannibal dragged him back against his chest. "Stay, just a few minutes. Then we'll get up."

"Okay," agreed Will. He relaxed into him, "This is nice."

"Hm," agreed Hannibal. "I'll cook breakfast while you're getting ready."

"I've gotta get to the scene."

"I told Jack you'd be at least an hour."

Will rolled over and buried his face in Hannibal's neck. "Let's just hide here."

"Alright," Hannibal agreed. He reached out and pulled the sheets over their heads, "Better?"

"Much," agreed Will running his hand over Hannibal's back as Hannibal stroked his hair. "I need to let the dogs out."

"I'll walk them for you."

"You don't even like them."

"I don't dislike them and you like them. I'll take them for a walk. They're good dogs."

"We should get out of bed," said Will, but he made no move to get out of bed. "Did you think I wanted arugula when you brought it here after I helped you with your patient?"

Hannibal huffed a laugh into his hair, "I'm a clever man, Will. I knew I hadn't been invited to dinner. I just wanted to see you."

“Alana thought maybe you were planting the idea of dating more firmly in my head.”

“Alana is a very clever woman,” Hannibal said.

Will smiled into Hannibal’s clavicle. “We should get out of bed,” he repeated.

“Jack knows where you live and he will turn up here if you don’t go there.”

Will groaned and sat up, “That’s a really horrible thought.”

“You should shower; you reek of sex.” He inhaled slowly and said, “It’s a shame to wash it off but you must.”

“Do you want to join me?”

“Yes, but then you really not get to that scene.”

Will laughed and stood, stretching, “I better let the dogs out.”

Hannibal lounged in the bed, watching him as he opened door. The dogs all got up, excited to see him. “You guys want to go outside?” He asked it in an excited tone. They wagged their tails and he said, “Yeah.” He went through the house to the kitchen and opened the door for them. The cold hit him and made him cringe. He shut the door behind them and poured food into their bowls and refilled their water.

Hannibal came in wearing nothing but clean pale blue briefs and a smile. “Go shower. I’ll let them in.”

“Thank you,” he went to pass Hannibal but the man caught him by the hips and kissed him slowly. As they broke apart he said, “Sorry about my morning breath.”

“I don’t care,” Hannibal squeezed his ass before letting him go.

Will went to his bathroom and turned on the water. As it warmed up he brushed his teeth and shaved off the majority of his facial hair and then stepped under the spray. He washed quickly because he didn’t want to waste a minute of the morning that he could be spending with Hannibal who was wearing nothing but underwear in his kitchen. He heard an odd noise and looked around the curtain. Hannibal was at the sink with his back to Will. “What are you doing?”

“I’m accidentally pouring that vile aftershave down the drain.”

“I have another bottle under the sink.”

“No, I accidentally poured that one out already.” He threw the bottle into the garbage, “So sorry about that.” He placed a glass bottle on the sink and left.

Will finished washing and dried himself. The bottle was written in French: Scent of Joy. When Will opened it it smelled warm and woodsy. He applied some to his pulse points and went through to his bedroom. He pulled on clean clothes and put on his glasses and went out

to the kitchen where Hannibal was cooking. He was still in his briefs and the dogs were eating, with clean paws. Will remembered watching him cook and wishing he could drape himself over Hannibal's back. Now he did just that. Hannibal turned slightly and sniffed him, "Perfect. It's almost like you're not wearing anything. It syncs with your own biological chemistry. People will think you smell like this."

Will looked into the pan and saw that Hannibal was poaching eggs. "I love poached eggs," said Will.

The toaster popped and Hannibal said, "Will you butter the toast, please? And put in two more slices?"

"Of course," Will set about the task happily. "Where is this crime scene?"

"The Bethesda Country Club."

That was only fifteen miles away, over state lines but still close. "Wow, that's close. I hate it when they're that close."

"There are terrifying people everywhere, Will, you just need to keep yourself safe."

"Yeah," agreed Will getting plates. "And you, I need to keep you safe."

Hannibal shot him a smile and said, "I certainly feel safer knowing you're on the case." He removed the eggs from the water and quickly cut up a tomato that had recently been in Will's fridge. Will was pleased there had been lots of food in his fridge for Hannibal to choose from. The other man would see Will had been taking care of himself.

The second set of toast popped out of the toaster and Will spread them with butter and brought them on plates to Hannibal. The man layered the toast with tomatoes and eggs and Will said, "That looks amazing," as Hannibal added salt and pepper to the dishes.

"You would say that if I handed you toast and jam."

"Toast and jam is amazing. Or bread and jam. My dad used to put bread and jam sandwiches in my lunch box." Will poured them coffee that Hannibal had made while he was showering. "Did Calvin watch you make this?"

"I ground the beans while they were outside. I don't really like the idea of his claws on my bare thighs."

Will looked his up and down and said, "It would be a real shame to mar your thighs with scratches."

Hannibal smiled at him, "I'm glad you think so."

Hannibal brought the plates to the table while Will carried over the coffee. They ate in comfortable silence and Harry came and sat on Will's feet. "This is a really great morning. I mean, I don't want to go to a crime scene, but right now, in this minute, this is a really great morning."

“It really is,” agreed Hannibal. “I wish we could have the whole morning. I don’t have an appointment until noon.”

“Sorry. I don’t think I’m going to get back in time to see you before you have to go. But have a nice time without me. You know where the towels are so make yourself at home.”

“I’ll shower once you’re gone and then take the dogs for a walk and head back to Baltimore.”

“Thank you.” He leaned over the table and their now-empty plates to kiss him. Hannibal stroked his cheek as they kissed. Harry shifted on Will’s feet. The two men shared breath and it felt good to relax with someone romantically for the first time in his adult life.

With a sigh Hannibal said, “You should go.”

“Yeah,” agreed Will. “Breakfast was delicious, thank you.” He stood, slowly nudging Harry off his feet. He got his pills and swallowed them with the last of his coffee. He went to his room and found his shoes and clean socks. He grabbed his coat from the living room and went to the kitchen where Hannibal was starting to clean the dishes, “Leave those. I’ll do them when I come home. I’m supposed to have lunch with Alana Bloom, which I’ll probably miss, but do you want to do something this evening?”

“Opera? We could finish Aida?” asked Hannibal. “I could cook us something at home and then come back here with you.”

“I’d like that. I’m sure even if I get wrapped up in this I can get away for the evening.”

“Good, and I’ll steal your lunch with Alana. I’ll call her in a little bit. Your loss will be my gain.”

Will smiled, “Great, okay.” He went to Hannibal and leaned up to kiss him. “I’ll call you later.”

“Wonderful,” Hannibal kissed him in an unhurried fashion. “Good luck with Jack.”

Will sighed, “Thanks, I need it.” He went to the front door and the dogs followed him and Charlie made a sad noise. “Every day, boys, we go through this every day.” He crouched and stroked them. “Promise, I always come back.” Harry climbed his thigh to press his head to Will’s face, “I always come home to you.” He patted them and straightened up. “Be good for Hannibal.” He smiled at the man as he stood, “I’ll see you later.”

“Goodbye,” Hannibal said with a small smile of his own.

He drove with zydeco music playing on the radio. It was nice though the reception sucked but he had a signal booster specifically bought for the station. It blasted through the speaker and he sang along with Clifton Chenier. He could feel the smile on his face and felt that he probably looked smug. He felt good. His ass was ever so slightly sore and his body felt loose, like his muscles had been taken apart and put back together in a more correct order. When he pulled up to the country club he stopped smiling. No one liked a smiling investigator. He turned down his music before he opened the window at the gate.

He held out his ID to the guard and said, “I’m with the FBI.” The man gave him directions to a golf cabana. As he pulled away he turned the music back up. He could identify his destination by the ambulances, cop cars and Beverly’s truck. When he parked he went directly to the police tape. A uniformed officer tried to stop him but Will held out his badge. “Jack Crawford is expecting me.” The guy held up the tape for Will.

Will went inside and saw her stretched out, as if in repose. She was stripped naked from the waist down, covered with an evidence blanket, a chunky girl. She was wearing a nice shirt, she’d clearly been out for the evening, using a sparkly top to try and draw the eye away from her big body. There was insecurity in her dress, over compensating for being overweight. She had known she was overweight but she hadn’t realized that she was a pretty girl. Someone had been nice to her, had made her feel good about herself and brought her here. She was only a teenager, barely more than a child. “Nothing’s ever easy for fat girls, is it honey?” He saw a shocked look exchanged between Zeller and Jimmy and he said, “Poor little girl.”

“I know you don’t like people touching the body but you were taking your sweet time so,” Jack’s voice had an edge.

“I completely understand,” he crouched down, “Do we know who she was?”

“No idea,” said Jack.

“Well, she’s no older than eighteen. She’s middle class, comfortable, it’s not a cheap shirt. Any idea how she got here?”

“There was a huge party fund raiser last night.” Beverly said, “There were over six hundred people.”

Will nodded, “Okay, what do we know about the guy? I assume, if we’re here, this isn’t the first one.”

“Eight in the last year and a half in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania. Always at a fancy party, always a woman who wasn’t on the guest list,” said Jack.

“A woman or a girl?” Will asked, not looking away. “This isn’t a woman. She’s a kid. Does he rape and murder women, is she an incongruity, or are you being politically correct and classifying her as a woman because calling her a girl sounds dismissive?”

“It’s the other was way around,” said Jack. “He murders then rapes girls. His oldest victim was twenty-two.”

“And are they all big girls?” asked Will.

“Yes.”

Will studied her. Was he picking up fat girls because he liked fat girls physically or was it that he was picking up girls with low self-esteem? A skinny girl with low self-esteem can be hard to spot but a fat girl with low self-esteem is always trying to fold into herself, always trying to blend. There wasn’t a struggle in this room. She came with him willingly and he took her

off-guard. He was tall and big. There were lacerations on her neck, she'd been garroted by something thin, something that bit into her flesh. A tool would make that easier but the wounds still spoke to strong hands. And rape after death? It wasn't about necrophilia, it wasn't that he liked sex with corpses. It was anger, it was spitting on them, it was proving he won. "You can't say no to me now, can't even or scream or whimper." He realized he was speaking aloud when he saw Beverly's eyes go wide. He thought about it and realized he'd been speaking aloud the whole time. The walls in his fort were cracking.

"It was a date," he said as he stood. "She came with him and then this should have been a special night. She didn't get to go on many dates. She knew him before last night. I would look at the girls' hobbies. They're meeting him somewhere, somewhere they feel safe. Book clubs or… check weight loss support groups, Weight Watchers. He meets these poor girls somewhere and as he's interested in their weight I'm guessing it's at one of those meetings." He looked at his watch. "I'm going to be late for class." He was also severely under dressed because he'd come dressed for a crime scene, not sure what he would be stepping through. He started to walk away from the poor dead girl.

Jack followed him too closely, "I want you in the lab after class. I have preliminary scene photos for you to examine. If you'd been here an hour ago you could have seen it yourself."

Will had to fight not to roll his eyes and said, "I'm a consultant, Jack, I'm a teacher with a temporary badge. I was in bed."

"And you weren't alone," said Jack.

Will stopped, "How dare you?" He turned to look at Jack, but kept his eyes focused on his cheek.

"I asked you about this and you lied," said Jack.

"You made a mocking comment insinuating that the mere idea of my having a private life was laughable and I chose not to respond. We're not friends, Jack, my personal life is absolutely none of your concern. What happens in my bedroom is my business and your apparent obsession with it is inappropriate and is, in fact, sexual harassment. If you would like to discuss this further we will do so in your superior's office. I'll see you after class." He saw the others were behind Jack and there were tons of people who were watching but he ignored them and went to his Volvo. His music blasted at him as he turned the key in the engine, a song about Louisiana in French set to Country Roads. He knew all the words and sang along as he left the golf course.

He rolled his head on his neck as he drove to Quantico. He passed through security quickly and went straight to his class room. People were talking and he said, "I apologize for my lateness and my attire. I was at a crime scene. Let's get on with it." He talked about blood patterns for close to an hour and finally said, "That's all the time we have today. I apologize again for being late. I will be out for the next two weeks. Dr. Bloom will be teaching you."

Once they were gone Will perched at the edge of his desk and pulled out his phone. He had so few numbers saved in his address book and Alana's number popped up first. It only rang once before she picked up saying, "Hey, don't worry, Hannibal called."

“Sorry. I’ve got to go over to the lab. I just came to teach class.”

“It’s really okay, Will. Go.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye,” she agreed.

They hung up and Will stretched. He sat down in his desk chair and let his head droop. Putting his hands in his lap he breathed out slowly. He remembered Mort’s instructions and listened to his heart, relaxed. It was slow because he was safe. He was Will Graham, he was awake and he was in Quantico, one of the safest buildings in the country. Everything was fine and he was breathing. He felt his chair beneath him, comfortable and known. He slowly inhaled and listened to his breathing. He sat still and imagined the air filling his lungs. He was safe and he was himself, responsible only for his own actions and culpable only to the law and his own conscience. This was his body, he lived in it and it belonged only to him. He was Will Graham and his life was his own. He wasn’t a murderer and he wasn’t a victim. He was safe, his dogs were safe and he inhabited his own body, his own space.

After a few minutes he shook himself and muttered, “Okay, you can do this.” He was still pleasantly sore as he walked over to the museum. Inside he went through to the lab without being harassed. The girl was on the slab and Will didn’t look at her. “Have we learned anything new?”

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Will just felt sad and tired by the time he left. He walked back to his car and when the music hit him he turned it off and let himself sink into his seat. Poor little pretty, nameless, fat dead girl. Somewhere, someone was waiting for her to call, waiting to hear about the date, wondering why she hadn’t checked in. Maybe he parents thought she was spending the night at a friend’s house. They hadn’t gotten a hit on her in any of their missing persons searches so she hadn’t been reported yet. He was on vacation and she wasn’t really his case anyway. He’d given Jack all the insight he could.

He went home to cuddle and walk his dogs. Sitting down on the floor he placed himself between the couch and the coffee table where he would usually work on the boat parts. Mort had told him to inhabit his space more consciously. He had told Will to sit and just take in his world. The dogs took the invitation to stretch out around him and he stroked them as he looked around, appreciated the home he had made. He admired his possessions and his dogs. This was his world it belonged to him and he belonged to it. After ten minutes he felt settled, he felt better than he usually felt after the initial rush of euphoria he got when greeted by the dogs. “I think Mort actually knows what he’s doing, guys, this feels nice.”

When he went into the kitchen he saw there was a note on the counter that simply read, “I hope all is well; call me when you get a chance.” It was signed with an “H” and an “x” for a kiss. It made him smile and he as he called for the dogs he pulled his phone from his pocket. As they walked over the fields he called Hannibal.

“Hello, Will. How are you?”
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“Why would anyone kill and rape a teenage girl?” he asked.

“I don’t know but I really hope that is not the setup for a joke.”

“No, there’s nothing funny about it. It’s nine, overweight, dead raped girls. How was your day?”

“I had a patient throw things at me.”

“Why?”

“His medication isn’t right. I sedated him and drove him to the emergency room. He’s fine now but I might be facing a malpractice suit.”

“I’m so sorry, are you okay?”

“I have insurance for this exact purpose. I’ll be fine; I messed up. I over medicated him and I have a cut on my face to show for it.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I left surgery because I didn’t want to hurt people with medicine. He’s a good man and I got him hospitalized,” The man sighed, “Let’s skip the opera. I’ll bring supplies and make dinner at your house?”

“Are you up for it?”

“After today I need it.”

“Okay, then I’ll see you soon.”

“At least it’s Friday, right?”

“I’m on vacation,” Will reminded him.

“I know, that’s why I baked a cake once I got home from the hospital.”

Will laughed, “Great, see you in a little while.” They hung up and Will sighed and Calvin barreled into him and knocked him off his feet. He landed with a huff of air and laughed, “You think you’re so much smaller than you are. Don’t you, yeah?” he ruffled Calvin’s fur. “Good boy, aren’t you? Yeah.” Calvin licked his face and Harry was instantly in his lap. “I have the best seven dog in the world, you’re amazing.” He stood up and patted their heads. “My boys.” After a while he said, “You guys want some water? You must because I want a drink.” He led the way back to the house. The ground had firmed up and he didn’t need to dry their feet and they weren’t muddied. He refilled their water bowls and poured himself a glass of iced tea lemonade. He checked his bedroom and saw that Hannibal had made his bed. “He’s perfect,” Will muttered.

Back in the living room he saw his fly supply box was open. He looked inside and something was out of place. Then it hit him: the material Hannibal had used to make flies had been

replaced. Hannibal had made three while he was gone. He opened his tackle box and sure enough they were missing. The man had disassembled them.

The phone rang and Will sighed, picking up he said, “I’m on vacation, Hannibal is perfect and I can’t wait to see you.”

His dad laughed, “So it didn’t go terribly.”

“No, it was good… shockingly good. Great, really. And he’s coming over in a little bit to cook dinner. I thought I was calling you later?”

“I have a date.”

“Really? Is she nice?”

“It’s Joanne from the bait shop.”

“She is nice,” said Will, “well, friendly.”

“You have to modify everything, don’t you?”

“Sorry. I hope you have a good time.”

“Thanks, you too. So how was Mort?”

“I liked him and I’ve been doing his breathing tricks and, I swear, they actually work. I feel okay right now, really fine and that’s different from how it’s been since I started consulting for Jack.”

“I’m worried about you, honey.”

“Why? I just told you something good.”

His dad sighed, “Because if you lied to me about Hannibal what else are you lying to me about?”

“Daddy,” he sighed, because he couldn’t argue. “I’ll see you on Monday. Then you can judge how I’m doing with your own eyes.”

“I know you don’t like it, but that’s how it’s gonna be. I know that you’re a grownup but I’m always gonna be your Daddy.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy. You had no idea that at your age you’d still have to worry about your son.”

“I worry about Richy drinking himself to death or killing someone while driving drunk, I worry about George ending up in prison for the rest of his life, I worry about the fact that Alex is selfish and unscrupulous and someday that’s gonna bite him in the ass. So yeah, I worry about you but I worry about all of you. I spend more time worrying about you than the others because you’re the only one I can actually help and protect.”

“I hate my job, and I’m having nightmares but I promise I’ll quit and not kill myself this time. I have more friends this time, and more dogs and I have a life this time. I promise I’ll call you when it gets bad. And, Daddy, honestly? It’s gonna get bad. It is. But knowing that is a good first step.”

“Oh, honey, You’ve got two weeks off.”

“Hannibal baked a cake to celebrate.”

“So things are looking up.”

Will chuckled, “Yeah. Are you all packed?”

“Mostly, is it still cold?”

“It’s spring. It’s colder than where you are but it’s a lot warmer than it’s been. Bring a coat.”

“You can’t move down south?”

“Not unless I want to end up getting lynched. You know that southerners don’t like me. Virginia’s not that far north.”

“Yeah, but DC is a Yankee town.”

“Do you remember how much you hated it when we lived in New York?”

“So damn cold, all the time,” said his dad. “No good barbeque, no good music. But Lake Erie was beautiful wasn’t it?”

“It really was.”

“That was your junior year of high school. You dated that boy, bad posture was a med student at U. Buffalo.”

“Daniel.”

“I didn’t like him.”

“I know.”

“I already like Hannibal and I haven’t met him yet. Anything I should know before I meet him? Your boyfriends are always funny looking and I don’t want to be surprised and end up rudely staring.”

“He’s handsome, way more handsome than people I normally date. He’s got red irises and an extra finger on his left hand. He’s also pretty much always in a suit.”

“You know what color his eyes are? You’ve been making eye contact, that’s great.”

“Rarely, but more than I do with most people. He doesn’t mind, so that’s good.”

“That’s still great.” His dad sounded genuinely pleased. “Should I brace myself for someone closer to my age than yours?”

That was a fair question, Will’s boyfriends were usually older and pretty much exclusively doctors. “He’s four months younger than Richy.”

“Oh, that’s firmly in your generation, good job.”

Will laughed, “Thanks.” He heard a car and said, “Hannibal just pulled up. I hope you have a nice time with Joanne.”

“Thank you. You have a nice night with Hannibal. I’ll call you Monday before I get on the plane.”

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you too, honey.”

They hung up and Will went to the door. Hannibal was getting things from the back seat. Hannibal had a big bandage above his left eye and Will said, “Oh, you poor thing. He really hit you.”

“He threw everything that wasn’t nailed down in my office at me. They checked me for a concussion. I’m fine. I just have a bit of a headache.”

Will went down the stairs and reached out to take bags from him. “It’s good to see you.”

Hannibal leaned in and kissed him. “After the day I’ve had it’s amazing to see you. I’m sorry about the poor girl. How was everything else?”

“I told Jack that if he asks me about our relationship again I’m going to report him for sexual harassment.”

Hannibal gave a dry laugh and said, “Let’s make dinner, shall we?”

“Yeah,” agreed Will. “I’d like that.”

Hannibal greeted the dogs with a simple, “Good evening, boys.”

“Let’s feed you guys out on the back porch. You’ll like that and it will keep you from getting under foot.” He guided them out through the kitchen and brought their bowls out. He put food out and brought them bowls of water. “Be good, guys.”

In the kitchen Hannibal shucked off his coat and Will saw he was wearing a linen shirt and his mouth went dry. “When you’re out of suits I can see your shoulders far more clearly and that’s pretty great.”

“I know you appreciate my body and I poured all your aftershave down the drain I thought I should make recompense.”

As Will washed his hands he said, “Beverly said I smelled nice. She said she liked my Old Spice because I smelt comforting — like her granddad — but that the new stuff smelled more fitting. So you were right.”

Hannibal smiled, and turned dibbed his head to inhale the air by neck, “I know, you smell amazing.”

“You sniff more than is polite.”

“I don’t need to be polite with you. You smell amazing.”

Will laughed and tucked his fingers beneath Hannibal’s chin and brought his face up for a kiss. “Thank you for making my bed, and taking my dogs for a walk and being my friend.”

Hannibal turned and kissed his neck, “You’re my favorite person on Earth; I am very nearly fond your dogs even though I really don’t like animals.”

“Except to eat them.”

“Meat is my favorite food group.” He turned to his shopping bags and pulled out store-wrapped lamb chops. “We’re making rosemary crusted lamb chops with asparagus and I was hoping you would make that delicious potato salad.” He started unpacking everything and Will saw that there was everything for the salad, and there was arugula. Hannibal took a cake carrier from one of the bags and Will saw that it was beautiful. It was perfectly iced in a shiny pale orange, perfectly smoothly. On top there were delicate spirals of candied orange peel and perfect candied flowers, violets and rose petals.

“Of course I will,” said Will. “That is the most beautiful cake I have ever seen. And I’ve got a big southern family: I’ve been to a lot of weddings.”

“We’re celebrating your much-needed vacation. It needed to be beautiful. Last night we said goodbye to winter. This is an almond and tequila cake with an orange water icing. Spring means college students doing shots of tequila with orange slice chasers in Florida.”

“This is prettier than a wedding cake.”

“Well, your better looking than the majority of grooms so that makes sense.” He placed it into the fridge.

Will smiled and gathered up what he needed. They worked next to each other. It was nice and quiet. He put the eggs on to boil and every once in a while Hannibal leaned over, smelled him and nodded. “Do I smell like the scent of joy?”

“You speak French?”

“My maternal grandmother was Creole. And a lot of dock workers in Louisiana are Creole. I speak Louisianan Creole French.”

“Is it very different?”

“There’s a lot of African and Native American words, very different grammar and different pronunciation.”

“Are you fluent?”

“Yeah, but every twelfth word is English when you’re talking it casually. And I doubt I could talk to a French person. It’s a separate language. It was my mother’s first language. And she and my dad started dating when they were fourteen so by the time I was born eighteen years later he was fluent. It’s not really considered a language, my dad wouldn’t call it one, but it is.”

“That’s fascinating, I had no idea. I thought it was just a few words and phrases.”

“No, it’s a language.” He moved to put the potatoes into the microwave.

“They were together for eighteen years?”

“Yeah, eighteen years. It’s the family love story. ‘Till death did they part.” It was comforting to be close to someone and not be panicking. He hated having someone in his space. But all the space was communal. “It’s great to have you here.”

Hannibal glanced at him. “Yes, it is.” The room filled with the smell of cooking meat, frying bacon and garlic and roasting asparagus and microwave-baking potatoes. They moved around each other and Hannibal said, “I like cooking with you more than anyone else. I love dinner parties but I hate all the people I need to pay to be in my kitchen, touching my things, but with you this is nice.”

“It helps that I’m not interfering with your meat.”

“That does help,” agreed Hannibal happily. Will started combining things for the salad as Hannibal checked oh his asparagus. And Hannibal shook his head. “No, it’s more than that. This feels right.”

Will felt his ears blush but said, “Even without your better cooking utensils?”

“Well, that would make it even better,” Hannibal nodded.

Will had made too much salad on purpose so they could have it for breakfast. He separated half of it, dumping it into a large bowl, not wanting to add the arugula to what they would have in the morning. He grabbed the eggs from the water to let them cool and moved on to the dressing. He added arugula to what was left in the pan and whisked the dressing with his other hand. Hannibal removed the asparagus from the oven and took the meat off the heat. He grabbed plates as Will transferred the salad with greens into another bowl and started to peel the eggs. As Hannibal started careful arranging food on the plates, making it art, he cut eggs into both bowls, added the dressing and started to toss them both. He passed the green salad to Hannibal and said, “You’re doing something with presentation so see if you can do something with it.” Hannibal made careful pyramids with egg slices resting on top.

There was a lot left in the bowl and Will moved it to the table then got them each a glass of iced tea lemonade. He let the dogs in and said, “Out, boys, living room.” He pointed they trotted out.

“Trying to walk them was rough,” said Hannibal as he brought the plates to the table.

“What do you mean? They’re perfect and it’s so relaxing.”

“They kept running off. I was so worried one would get to the road and I would be in charge when one of your dogs got hit by a car.”

“They never wander off. They’re never more than twenty feet away,” Will said. The chops were upright, bones resting together in a nest of asparagus. His first bite was juicy and delicious.

“From you, they never wander far from you. They kept chasing each other far away from me. I couldn’t find any leashes.”

“Oh, I only have leashes in the car for when we go to P.E.T.C.O.”

Hannibal looked at him with confusion, fork raised half way to his mouth, “Why did you spell that?”

“They understand that word as a command like sit, roll over or shake. But usually I shout it while waving my hands over my head.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s exciting. They get to go into a store, they get to see other dogs and they get treats. It’s fun for all eight of us.”

“Do you buy food by the pallet?”

“I buy it in bulk for cheap through a distributer. It would be really expensive to buy it from a retail place. At P.E.T.C.O. I just get treats and toys. They so rarely get a chance to go somewhere. And I always get offered a job because I walk in with seven perfectly behaved dogs. I could be a trainer there. It’s eleven dollars an hour and they’d give it to me full time so I could get medical insurance and I would get a substantial discount. Combine that with my monographs and when I have my inevitable breakdown I’ll still be okay. Not as comfortable as I am now but still pretty comfortable. Plus, I would get to stroke dogs all day.”

“There are worse jobs for you,” Hannibal said between bites.

“Way worse,” agreed Will. “It would be pretty great. The one perk of having a breakdown will be meeting new dogs every day.” He gave a dry laugh.

Hannibal put his utensils down, reached out and placed his hand over Will’s which was holding his knife, “Will, I’ll help you as much as I can and if you do end up having a

psychotic break I will stand by you then too. You're not alone, you have your dad, me, Alana and Abigail. We care for you and you are never alone."

Will examined his fork and said, "I was gonna go see Abigail tomorrow."

"We should bring lunch and a slice of cake."

Will shook his head and looked up at Hannibal, "No, a slice of cake suggests an afterthought, 'We had a party and didn't invite you but here is left over cake.' Of course we can't invite her as Alana put her foot down. But, still, for a girl as outside-of-the-loop as Abigail is, a slice of cake is worse than no cake at all — a reminder of what she's missing. Why didn't we bring her the dinner the cake was supposed to go with? Does she not rate dinner? I haven't seen her in weeks. Have I forgotten her and brought her a single slice of cake as an act of politeness? She doesn't rate care and consideration just a slice of cake."

"I bow to your greater ability to empathize with people." Hannibal gave a slight bow of his head. "Would you be upset if we saved the cake? We could bring it to share with her."

"No, I'd be glad if we did that."

"Then that is what we shall do."

"I think she would really like that. She has group in the morning and Alana frequently goes over at lunch time but we could bring the cake and spend the afternoon with her? The weather is supposed to be good. We could bring a blanket and eat in that nice little garden."

"That sounds wonderful, Will."

"You disassembled the flies you made," said Will remembering that he'd seen the open box, "Why?"

"I saw that you had a beautiful fly in your mantelpiece. It made me curious, sorry, I looked at your fly collection."

"When it's you I don't mind."

"Thank you. Mine were so embarrassingly simple compared to yours that I felt I had wasted your raw materials."

"I didn't think they were simple. They were like naïve art."

"I've never understood why people value naïve art. If I'm supposed to value Grandma Moses she should have learned how to value skill."

Will laughed at that, happy that Hannibal — nice, kind Hannibal — could be scathing. "I didn't make the one on my mantelpiece. That was a Christmas gift from my father. I can't imagine actually using it. Those dragonfly wings would fall off after the first cast. I liked yours."

"Will you teach me?"

“Sure,” Will said, “you already know the basics.” They started to eat in earnest, “This is delicious.”

“And lamb chops are on sale at Giant-Landover. I was planning on doing chops anyway but I thought you might want to get some for when your dad comes.”

Will nodded, “I get the circular. It’s funny that you know the cost of meat at Giant-Landover.”

It was all delicious and Will thought Hannibal had made a good call coupling the meat and asparagus with the potatoes. And Hannibal said, “How’s your father today?”

“He was going on a date tonight. Joanne from the bait shop.”

“Do you like her?”

“I don’t dislike her. I don’t know her but she’s always really nice. She never attempts to make eye contact. Lot of people, especially people down there, try to force me to make eye contact and she’s always been very nice and not mentioned it. She and my dad have always gotten on really well. She was married, he died last June. I guess she’s done grieving. I hope they have a good time.”

“You might need to get your suit ready for a wedding.”

“That would be something,” Will smiled. Hannibal had cleaned his plate and studied Will for a moment before he eat from the communal salad bowl Will laughed, “You do these things on purpose.”

“You need to laugh more. You’ve been with the corpse of a raped teenage girl. You need to laugh.”

Will half stood and leaned over to kiss him, “You’re amazing.” He moved the salad bowl to be between them and they ate from it communally. “How was the rest of your day? Before you got stuff thrown at you?”

“One of my favorite patients is home from college for ‘spring study days’ whatever that is, so she came in for an appointment. It was nice to see her. She has a new boyfriend and all sorts of exciting things going on. It was nice to see her. She’s doing well.” He smiled, “Did you have any good points in your day?”

“Mort’s exercises work. That’s nice.”

“So nothing good external to your own body happened?”

“No, I was late for my sole class of the day. I like teaching and I missed close to twenty minutes. I didn’t have any time to work on my monograph. Then I skipped lunch because I was in the lab where I can’t even think of eating. And we didn’t get anywhere near an ID on the poor girl… Waking up in bed with you was nice and breakfast was great but that was before the day began.”

Hannibal smiled, “That was the highlight of my day too.”

They finished the salad and Will stood, moving to the cupboards he got the coffee and the grinder out. He put his kettle full of water on the stove and lit the rings. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” Hannibal nodded.

Will’s cell phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket. The name on the screen made him wince. “Will you answer this and remind him that I’m on vacation and that he needs to leave me alone?”

Hannibal held out his hand for the phone and Will handed it off, pleased that someone else could take the burden of Jack if only for one phone call. Hannibal answered saying, “Good evening, Jack. Will can’t come to the phone. Can I pass on a message?” He listened, a look of surprise on his face. “Do you have any suspects?” he was silent for a while and then said, “Of course. Yes, I’ll tell him… Of course.” He hung up. “Ms. Lounds has been murdered.”

Will felt his mouth go dry, “Am I a suspect?” He had to be. He’d threatened her.

Shaking his head Hannibal said, “No, it appears that it was an old colleague: another rude tabloid writer. Like call to like, I suppose. There’s little motive but she did snake a few of his stories. Preliminaries have already yielded a hair on her body that matches his in color and a bloody index print on a knife.”

“She was stabbed?” asked Will.

“Twelve times, it wasn’t fast. Apparently there was a blood trail that shows she tried to run.”

Will blinked and said, “I really wish I could feel badly. That’s a horrible way to die but… it couldn’t have happened to a nicer person.” He shrugged, “I can’t really gloat because that’s a really horrible way to die. But I sort of want to. It’s really nice to know I’ll never appear on her blog again. I’m relieved she’s dead. I’ve never been good at dealing with bullies.”

“Is that how you viewed her?”

“I didn’t want to be in the field but I was pulled in by Jack and a bunch of dead girls. I caught Garrett Jacob Hobbs. I was doing the right thing. And then she started digging and writing about me and my dad saw it and my students saw it. And she turned up at crime scenes and would try to corner me. She was a bully. I hated her and I was scared that she was going to find out about my custody arrangement. It wouldn’t have taken that much digging. Thankfully she was lazy and turned to accusations instead of research. Now I don’t have to worry about that being all over the internet. She never found out about my encephalitis and I was waiting for that, holding my breath. I’m relieved. When did it happen?”

“According to Mr. Zeller’s analyses a few days ago. She was found this afternoon. Jack was only brought in on it after you left the lab. He thinks they’ll be working all weekend. To his credit he didn’t suggest you go in to help.”

Will shrugged, “He doesn’t want me for the forensics just the imagination.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m worried about how relieved I am. I hated her so much. I’m pleased she’s dead and that makes me feel badly.” He shrugged, “Coffee?”

“Coffee,” agreed Hannibal.

“I know we’re waiting on the cake but I have Gavottes. You’re careful about with what you eat but they haven’t changed the recipe since 1920 so they can’t have anything weird in them.”

Hannibal laughed, “I like Gavottes.”

“That’s something you have in common with my dad.” He got the huge tin he’d brought in preparation for his dad’s visit. Then he scooped the right amount of coffee into the grinder.

Over the noise of it he heard Hannibal say, “Four, three, two, one.” Then the dogs ran into the kitchen and Calvin scaled Will’s leg. “There he is.”

Will laughed, “Hey, Calvin.” He turned off the grinder and Calvin let out a small whine and settled back on four paws. He poured the grinds into the coffee pot and got the kettle, now boiled, off the hob and added the water. He brought the cookies to the table.

Hannibal took the lid from the tin and took out one of the little foil wrapped packages of two cookies. “My mother used to buy these at Christmas. They always seemed so fancy in their individual packages.”

Will laughed, “They are fancy.”

“I remember my sister and I took the whole tin,” he tapped the side of the tin in front of him with his fingernail, “and hid under her bed one Christmas Eve. We got a third of the way through the tin before my father found us and ordered us back to bed.” He smiled at the box, fondly, “That was only weeks before the car accident.”

As Will poured the coffee he said, “I’m so sorry, Hannibal. How old were you both?”

“I was eleven and she was five but despite our age gap we were very close. It helped that I wasn’t sent to boarding school like the men in my family had been. I had a tutor at home. When she was born she was so red, her face was scrunched up. She reminded me of a squirrel… an ugly squirrel. But I swear, the first time she looked at me I fell in love with Mischa. And I worried about her. I remember going to my father when she was three. I was concerned because she couldn’t read. He laughed and said, ‘She’s only a baby.’ My parents always said I was born able to read. My nanny left me alone with a book when I was two and when she came back I was reading aloud. When she died I had been trying to teach her.”

“You were a great big brother.” Will handed him a cup of coffee.

Hannibal shook his head, “No, I was a fantastic big brother.”

Will smiled, “So sorry for the slight.”

“Then again, she was a fantastic little sister.” He took a sip of coffee. “Delicious as always,” he said.

“High praise, coming from you.” Will dipped one of the cookies into his coffee, for less than a second, it was so delicate that any longer than that and it would melt. “You were home schooled?”

“Tutored, there’s a difference. Home schooling implies backwardness. The schools in our area weren’t very good, hence the fact that boys in my family went to boarding school.”

“What about the girls?”

“I don’t know. Mischa was the first daughter in four generations. I’m sure she would have had a tutor of her own. My parents believed in education. They met at university; in Rome. My parents were the first to marry for love.”

“How did they marry before?”

“Royalty, even in Lithuania, likes arranged marriages. It keeps the money in the right circles and the blood ‘pure.’”

Will studied him and said, “You’re royalty?”

Hannibal nodded nonchalantly, “Social I go by Dr. Lecter but my bank accounts are under the name Count Hannibal Lecter the Eighth.”

“You’re not joking,” said Will.

“You don’t get maroon eyes and a sixth finger without a significant amount of inbreeding and the only way to get inbreeding in a modern society is by being royalty.” Hannibal shrugged, “Extra fingers and red eyes ran in the families of both my paternal grandfather and paternal grandmother because they were the same family. They were first cousins twice removed. I believe my great-great-great-grandparents were actually siblings. I suppose that nobody wanted to move out of the castle. My mother was descended from the people who had once ruled Milan, but any title was gone. My grandfather wasn’t very happy about the lack of a title but was impossible not to fall in love with her. She was poised, brilliant, witty and beautiful. It helped that she could refill the family coffers. And I think the old man realized that my father was head over heels and didn’t try to dissuade him.”

“Were they happy?”

“They adored each other. They were never happier than when we had no guests or company and it was just the four of us. When we were out of the castle, up at the cabin, when it was only us — no staff or visitors, no fancy clothes or pretention — they could never stop smiling at each other. She cooked, he shoveled snow and did outdoor repairs; he played the guitar, she sang along.”

“And was it actually a castle?”

“Turrets, moat, oubliette and all.”

“Wow, an oubliette? That’s creepy.”

“My father lowered me down it once. It was a special treat. I saw that on the wall someone had scratched the word pourquoi. When my father pulled me back up I asked him what the word meant, I was four and didn’t know French. My father told me it meant, ‘Don’t tell Mother.’ Then I went to Mother and said, ‘Does pourquoi mean don’t tell mother?’ Her French was much better than Father’s and I thought he had mistranslated. I didn’t realize it was an order. She asked me to explain the context and I told her. And she screamed at my father for putting me down there but my father explained that he thought it had never been used. I started to cry because I didn’t like it when they fought — it was so rare that it frightened me. Then they turned to me and my mother picked me up and said, ‘We all need cake; that’s what we need.’ And as I pulled myself together I said, ‘What does pourquoi mean?’ And my mother asked, ‘Was there anything else down there? Other than the word?’ And I said no and she said, ‘Then it means that whoever wrote it didn’t stay in the oubliette forever and I bet that he got home safely.’ And then we had cake.”

“That sounds traumatizing,” said Will. His skin crawled just thinking about it.

“I didn’t know what pourquoi meant until I was eight and I didn’t know what an oubliette was for until I was ten. It was all too gradual to be distressing. Although, when I understood the whole situation, I loved my father even more for it. It’s so bizarre and inappropriate. He was like that. He never thought about the full implications of something before doing it. He was impetuous, fun and ridiculous. Who lowers a four-year-old into an oubliette? Even an unused one?”

Will laughed, “He sounds strange.”

“He was. When he realized I could read at the age of two he handed me the first volume of the encyclopedia and just watched me as I made my way through the letter A. He kept bringing me cups of tea, quizzing me — checking for reading comprehension — and saying, ‘How’s it going?’ He watched me with fascination for two hours before I said I was bored and wanted to go swimming and then we went swimming.”

Will laughed again and said, “The encyclopedia?”

“Yes, and then there was a lot of joking about me getting a tutor.”

“Did they?”

“Not until I was six, had finished the encyclopedia and was fluent in Italian and English. Then Mr. Jarvis taught me German, French and Latin. He was lovely, no text books just chatting and walks. He was amazing.” Will smiled at him and Hannibal said, “What?”

“I have learned more about your childhood from handing you a tin of cookies than I have through months of knowing you.”

Hannibal laughed, “They’re good cookies.” He studied Will, “Bed?” He put the lid back on the tin.

“Yeah,” agreed Will. “Does your face hurt?” he asked as he went to get his encephalitis pills, “I have a vast array of painkillers.”

“Do you have ibuprofen? That will be enough to cut off the headache and help the swelling.”

Will handed him the bottle and got them both a glass of water. He swallowed his handful of pills with a few sips of water as Hannibal did the same. Then Will kissed him slowly. “Bed.” He took Hannibal by the hand and led him to the bedroom.

“Have you considered moving upstairs? Your view would be even better. And you’re less likely to sleepwalk.”

“But my dogs are down here.”

“They don’t sleep in your bed.”

Will said as he unbuttoned Hannibal’s shirt, “They do when you aren’t here. And I’m more likely to sleepwalk out the upstairs’ window.”

Hannibal kissed him slowly and said, “I still think your view would be better.”

They stripped each other and Will worried that he would freeze. What if last night he’d been just running on adrenaline? But when Hannibal ran a knuckle down Will’s back he practically melted into the man. It still felt right. They made out slowly and Will crawled back on the bed. He stroked Hannibal and said, “How did you get so fit sitting behind a desk all day?”

“Careful diet and hunting on foot,” said Hannibal, which just made Will laugh. They caressed each other gently and Hannibal sighed into his mouth. “You beautiful man.” He kissed a path from Will’s shoulder to his mouth. Will bit his lip as Hannibal started to stretch him and Hannibal groaned at the sensation. “Perfect,” Hannibal said.

“I want you,” Will said as he grabbed a condom from the bedside table. Will felt like he was more present in his body than he had been since before he got sick, hell, since before he started working for Jack. He knew who he was, where he was and exactly what he was doing. He tangled his fingers into Hannibal’s hair as they kissed. In this moment everything was right in his world.

He laughed into Hannibal’s mouth. “What?” asked Hannibal.

“Nothing,” Will shook his head.

“What?” repeated Hannibal.

“This is my design,” Will said and laughed.

Hannibal smiled against his mouth as he slid into Will, “Are you sure it isn’t mine?”

“Maybe it’s both of ours,” Will conceded.

They moved together, skin sliding against skin, sweat and saliva mixing indiscriminately. And it all felt good. He was relaxed, focused and really enjoying this act. He sighed against Hannibal's throat. It was a dance, never meant to be seen and shared only with each other. Will moaned as Hannibal slid into him. He curled into Hannibal and stroked his hands down his back. For the first time in months he felt like he was clear. This was his life and, in this moment, his life was good. They rocked together, sharing breath and it made Will's nerves light up with pleasure. When he finally came something clicked in his mind and he said, "Maybe I should get a job at Petco."

"What?" asked Hannibal with a laugh. Will writhed with him, working to get Hannibal off.

"I think I'd be happier as a Petco employee," he gently bit Hannibal's neck as the other man shuddered and stilled.

"I'd like you to be happier," agreed Hannibal, stroking Will's flank as he slowly moved to rest next to him.

"Could you date a man who works at Petco?" asked Will.

Hannibal was still half on top of him, which Will liked. "Is there a rule that says a dog trainer can't date a doctor?"

"What would you tell your friends?" asked Will.

"That you work at Petco," Hannibal smiled at him.

"You wouldn't be ashamed?" asked Will. "Wouldn't you feel like you were slumming it?"

"No." Will studied him and Hannibal smiled. "I don't care. I genuinely don't care what anyone thinks. If you want me to dress it up I'll say that my partner is an eccentric who left his job as the most respected profiler at the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit to instead follow his dream of cuddling every dog he meets."

"Partner?" repeated Will.

"Aren't you?" asked Hannibal.

"Yeah," agreed Will.

"Are you going to quit the BAU?" asked Hannibal.

Will shook his head slowly, "No. But it's a nice idea."

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